

Sex and Gender

Barbara Holland-Cunz

In the history of political and natural philosophy, there are hardly any terms that were and are as strongly charged with controversial interpretations as “sex” and “gender”. From the historically and geographically almost ubiquitous assumption of women’s closeness to nature, to the radical rejection of all connections between biological sex and social gender formulated by today’s dominant current of gender studies, there is no ‘neutral’ definition of these terms, although at first glance they appear to be undeniable facts. The manifold dimensions and contrasting definitions can nevertheless be classified in terms of the history of ideas: in particular in terms of conceptions of the nature-culture relation as well as in terms of the most important positions within modern feminist theory, i.e. the locus of disputes about the definition of sex and gender since the end of the 18th century. The question that permeates the various positions always remains that of the ‘share’ of the cultural (symbolic) in the understanding of sex and the ‘share’ of the natural (material) in the understanding of gender. The dispute over the interpretation of the most famous feminist phrase – “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Simone de Beauvoir) – stands paradigmatically for every conceivable controversy.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Gender as material and symbolic (dimorphic) sexuality

For hundreds of years, the term *gender* (*Geschlecht*¹) meant, strictly speaking, *women* – denoting the sex marked with (biological and social) femininity as well as a presumed closeness to nature, while masculinity seemed implicitly identical with being human in general. Rarely in cultural history since antiquity has *Geschlecht* been a purely descriptive category; this is true across almost all times and places. Just as the marked skin colour was, and often still is, the non-white, the non-male represents *the marked sex*, while the male reclaims for himself all anthropologically universal and philosophically universal determinations. Markings represent paradoxes of domination that permeate the individual lives of the

dominated: increased visibility with simultaneous social invisibility, ascription of friendly closeness to nature with simultaneous suspicion of threatening wildness, otherness and specialness with simultaneous repressive inclusion. The two most prominent markers of human existence – sex and skin colour – provoke dramatic social consequences as anatomically recognisable, socially relevant characteristics.

Although women were put into one category with gender, philosophically it is equally true that a sexual dimorphism has been at the center of the definition of gender since the beginnings of thought. Here, anatomical sex forms the apparently inescapable basis of its social configuration. Furthermore, the dimorphic character of human beings and of a part of non-human nature – that is, of all those species that do not reproduce “asexually” by simple cell division but “sexually” by recombination

¹ This article is a translation of the entry “Geschlecht” (Holland-Cunz 2021). The German term “Geschlecht” is ambiguous: It can mean “sex” as well as “gender” as well as both at the same time, without implying a

certain view of their character or relationship. We have left the term “Geschlecht” untranslated where it has this ambiguity, and only translated it with “sex” or “gender” where clearly one of these meanings is intended.

of chromosome sets – is considered to be the material and symbolisable expression of all life on this planet, with the following characteristics: a) sexual dimorphism is material-bodily and appears symbolically-pictorially ubiquitous, b) its specific manifestations and forms of interpretation are, however, culturally diverse, c) an unequal evaluation of the two elements within the dimorphism is, however, supra-historically present in an almost routine way, d) whereby the female is always considered biologically and socially inferior to the male (physically and psychologically weaker), e) which is why the dimorphism in particular as well as sex in general do not represent neutral descriptions or designations, f) the ability to bear children, the central role of women in generativity, is devalued in almost every real- or ideological activity and discourse; particularly drastic here is, for example, the assumption in medical and philosophical history that women are only passive vessels for the donation of life originating in men (cf. Merchant 1980).

Today, however, dimorphism as the core of a definition of sex does not (any longer) refer primarily to the average dimorphic anatomy of the human species and its dimorphic reproductive capacity. In the currently prevalent strand of feminist theory, it means above all the critique of the norm of heterosexuality or compulsory heterosexuality or heteronormativity and the rejection of the assumption of a relevance of anatomical differences (cf. Butler 1990; 1993); here, (seemingly neutral) descriptors of human nature become a topos that is vehemently directed against the entire history of philosophy as a patriarchal construction. The philosophically unchallenging perspective of generic reproduction (binary sexual anatomy and opposite-sex desire) is shifted to the critique of the normalisation of (hetero)sexuality. The central determination from now on focuses on the differences and entanglements between gender, gender identity, and desire (cf. Butler 1991: 22–24), since not every anatomically female body thinks and feels itself as female and heterosexual.

1.2 Gender as a multiplication of the sexes

Accordingly, the current mainstream of gender studies sees itself as the intellectual field where many/all genders are in the spotlight. The relevance of biological sexual dimorphism is contested and alternative conceptions clearly go beyond the third gender category “diverse”

established by the 2017 Federal Constitutional Court ruling for medically intersexual people and enshrined in German civil law since 2018. Legislators are currently still cautious about gender variability, but there are draft laws on the subject – in particular that proposed by the parliamentary group of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen for the (linguistically mediated) opening up of gender identity beyond physical characteristics – that have not yet been passed. Following the politically significant (further) steps of an emancipatory consolidation of women’s a) sexual and b) reproductive self-determination, this third step implies c) gender self-determination in the sense of an *individual right of self-designation* with regard to one’s *perceived gender*. The physicality of gender (*Geschlecht*), gendered corporeality, is considered marginal or even irrelevant, as gender is increasingly understood as a far-reaching socially constituted reality.

Beyond gender studies, however, this understanding of gender is strongly criticised as a denial of the natural endowment of the human species; the binarity of the generative is regarded as an inescapable natural basic endowment, the bipolar reproduction of the species as the foundation of any appropriate definition of gender. Correspondingly, the social polarisation of genders or gender roles or the gender division of labour carry much biological and social weight (cf. historically on polarity Kuster 2019) and any (queer) feminist negation is rejected as unscientific and politically dubious. As the nature argument is prominently and vehemently advocated especially by right-wing populist parties and right-wing oriented publics in Europe (cf. Hark/Villa 2015; Henniger/Birsl 2020), positions within the feminist spectrum that are critical of constructivism currently have a hard time approaching the relation between biological and social gender from a materialist perspective. Such an analysis is quickly suspected of right-wing thinking and is rigidly excluded from academic discourse, because gender self-determination is considered a new and advanced achievement of feminist freedom.

In the meantime, however, there is also an objection from the viewpoint of the history of philosophy to constructivist accounts of gender, as these have (increasingly) dominated gender research since the beginning of the 1990s. Christoph Türcke’s (2021) recently published work *Natur und Gender* argues against a purely social version of gender and critically examines Judith Butler’s theses (Türcke 2021: 123 ff.). The complete self-determination

of gender culminating in the hubristic self-creation of biological sex ignores the “obstinacy” of nature, discards the appropriate human “courage” belonging to it, and leads to philosophical fallacies (ibid.: 166, 218). In the final analysis, it expresses a capitalist mania for possibility, remote from nature and obsessed with microelectronic technology, that culminates in dramatically increased numbers of sex changes, the excessive normalisation (ibid.: 171 ff., esp. 183) of which (ibid.: 171 ff., esp. 183) reflects current culture’s “unrestrained (self-)creation theology” (ibid.: 215).

In this way, the politically motivated equation of nature-related reflections on gender with right-wing or at least right-wing populist thinking, an equation one finds in feminist social constructionism, is called into question. Criticism of social constructionism is neither ‘automatically’ right-wing nor systematically anti-feminist but finds support in the history of ideas concerning nature and gender, where it is a significant strand of occidental thought (Holland-Cunz 1994; 2014; 2017).

1.3 Dimensions and definitions of gender beyond dimorphism and pluralisation

Beyond the interpretive struggles around sexual dimorphism, heteronormativity and gender self-determination, the following classical dimensions of the category of gender can be distinguished: the biological (sex) and the social (gender) – here the fundamental *relationship between nature and culture* is crucially negotiated; the biological dimension can be further differentiated into the genetic (chromosomal), the morphological (anatomical) and the hormonal – here the relation between different definitions of “natural *Geschlecht*” is clarified or the relationship between different gender “naturalities” discussed; gender in relationship to the classical categories of production and reproduction, whereby the proposed conceptual pair “re-production/re-productivity” is important (Bauhardt 2011a; 2011b; 2019) – here, the male and female shares in the preservation of the species are placed within a personal, social and evolutionary relationship; in this context, production and reproduction designate both biological and social options for action that are concerned with the existential, with human survival.

The central locus of the struggle for a definition of *Geschlecht* for more than two centuries is feminist theory; the entire spectrum of what is philosophically

conceivable in the nature-culture relation is present here in theories of politics and nature (and even in political practice). The controversies of materialism versus idealism, essentialism versus constructivism can be found here too, along with social and scientific critiques of every provenance. In the more than two hundred years of modernity, the hegemonies of the different stages of gender politics that have shaped the definition of gender itself are reflected. There is no topic in feminism that is so fiercely and perennially contested as the relation between nature and culture in the determination of *Geschlecht*: is it first and foremost a material or a symbolic embodiment of human existence? This fundamental question of political theory is manifested paradigmatically in the core proposition of feminism.

2. The most famous sentence in the history of feminist ideas

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, writes Simone de Beauvoir ([1949] 2011: 293) in the middle of her monumental work *The Second Sex* (*Le Deuxième Sexe*), published in 1949, a sentence which continues to shape every debate on the formation of gender to this day. Even here it is true that being gendered and being woman are, albeit analytically, intertwined. The sentence paradigmatically marks the controversy about the nature-culture relation: Is being a woman a biological being or a social becoming? Is personal sexuality essentially determined by sex or by gender?

This well-known sentence, quoted a thousand times, stands at the beginning of the 400 pages in which Beauvoir ([1949] 2011: 289–682) traces in detail the reality of the lives of girls and women in the mid-20th century through every stage of life and experience. Beauvoir describes both specific bodily experiences and their social interpretations, both the individual relationship to the world and the social narratives concerning it, following these themes through every phase of life history. In this way, Beauvoir documents the far-reaching differences that result from the various biologically and socially female and male perspectives on the body and the world. Beauvoir’s approach precisely illuminates how male and female bodies think, feel and act in their respectively divergent access to the world, since it is not irrelevant in/with which body the world is experienced. Any access to the world is first and foremost through the body.

In contrast to constructivist misunderstanding of the famous sentence, that it supposedly declares biological sex irrelevant (or at least subordinate), the relation between material experience and symbolic processing always plays a significant role in Beauvoir's thinking. Material experience and cultural symbolisation are not mutually exclusive – not even where social interpretations escalate into contradictions, aporias or extremes (classically: saint and whore) –, they are not two independent realities that interact with each other but interwoven poles of one and the same reality. Beauvoir always keeps the two sides of human existence in view: thus the anatomical penis is culturally the phallus and as such the sign of male domination; materially, it instigates a different bodily experience than the outwardly barely visible primary female sexual organs. Beauvoir repeatedly illustrates how girls' and women's specific bodily experiences of menstruation, heterosexuality, pregnancy, and childbirth facilitate socially devaluing symbolisations of femininity, because they can symbolically take up, intensify, or even escalate the physical misperception/discomfort of, for example, painful or embarrassing bodily processes that result from the strong attachment to reproductive tasks. The female half of the human species is much more subject to the physical demands of reproducing the species: physical possibilities become social limitations. This makes the implementation of Beauvoir's categorical imperative of an unfolding of freedom for girls and women *de facto* more difficult.

In Beauvoir's existentialist anthropology, however, the cultural attributes of domination are no natural legitimations of domination; nor are the natural experiences of the body and the world negligible contingencies of human existence. *Anatomical nature predisposes cultural interpretations only conditionally, but also not entirely by chance – material thinghood and symbolic interpretation are closely connected.* For Beauvoir, therefore, the fundamental commonality of all human beings – their (psychologically and intellectually) painful struggle between the desire for, and fear of, freedom – represents the way out of patriarchal arrogations and impositions of domination; Beauvoir's existentialist anthropology of human binary sexuality aims at the cultural choices of freedom that should be demanded of every human. The fact that the "female" of the human species (Beauvoir [1949] 2011: 41 ff.) is at the same time distinguished by her ability to give birth and is thereby bound to the species, does not

necessarily have to degrade women to the second sex. The fundamental differences of anatomy and respective tasks in the reproduction of the genus, however, must not be negated, neither in terms of natural philosophy nor in terms of social theory.

3. The nature-culture relation

3.1 Dualisms and social critiques in the definition of gender

The nature-culture relation (Böhme 1989; 1992) is the core of every conception of gender, but it is connected with a long series of further dualisms: nature/environment/matter/body (processes)/material world/biological/sex stand on one side, culture/society/discourse/symbolisations/social/gender on the other, or, as Donna Haraway (2009: 18) critically sums it up, "sign and flesh". The relationships between nature and gender are directly built into these chains of dualisms (cf. Deuber-Mankowsky 2019), since the imaginaries of the feminine (and to a much lesser extent those of the masculine) – concerning both human and non-human nature – have a direct impact on nature and gender relationships, for example in the social interpretation of production processes, in the social understanding of natural processes, in the use and exploitability of material resources, in the understanding of labour and the division of labour, in the extent and degree of a culturalisation of nature and the degree of a naturalisation of culture. Underlying all these potential levels of interpretation is the patriarchal core thesis (or core question), namely that (or whether) the biologically female capacity for childbearing could establish a different, 'better' relationship to human and non-human nature – that is, the assumption that women are closer to nature than men in both a positive (as it were, ideological-ecological) and negative (as it were, politically irrational) sense.

With the term "societal relationships with nature", the Frankfurt Institute for Social-Ecological Research (ISOE), following on from Critical Theory, already presented a conceptual design in the 1980s that allows for a sophisticated version of the nature-culture relation (see for example Jahn 1991; Görg 1999; 2003) which considers the materiality of matter and processes without lapsing into essentialisations, biologisations or naturalisations of nature and gender – a conception with which "sign and flesh" can be placed in a highly complex interrelation.

With the terms “societal relationships with nature and gender” it is even possible to avoid the intra-feminist controversies and pitfalls resulting from women’s alleged “closeness to nature” (a classical patriarchal as well as gynocentric-feminist ideologem) or the apparent “femininity” of non-human nature (a frequent motif throughout the history of philosophy with conceptualisations such as “Mother Earth” and “Gaia”). The socio-critical conceptual pair “relationships with nature and gender” facilitates both an analysis of the naturalisation of gender domination (especially of any apologetic concepts which assume the supposedly nature-given physical and intellectual superiority of men) and the ideologically interested gendering of nature (mostly in images of the feminine whose unbridled wildness must be subjugated for the benefit of human civilisation). Nature and gender become analytically transparent through their historicisation, without idealistically dissolving the intrinsic logic of the material into discourses and narratives.

3.2 Naturalisations of gender and genderings of nature

In the history of philosophy, the aforementioned naturalisations of culture as well as culturalisations of nature are omnipresent. The most famous example of this double figure of thought is found in modern contract theory, in which the imagined state of nature outlines a putatively pre-societal situation which then determines the anthropological preconditions of the state of society. Whether it is Thomas Hobbes’s ([1651] 1986) war of each against all, in which aggression appears the best defence, or Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ([1755] 1999) initially peaceable state of nature in which the savage roams alone in the woods: invented images of nature always provide the starting point for political theory’s ideas about a needed new political structure. It goes without saying that culturalisations enter into anecdotes about the state of nature. Hobbes’ state of nature formulates for the first time a modern political anthropology, in which pre-social man (contra Aristotelianism) is sketched as essentially equal and asocial; extra-social relationships with nature are thus necessarily warlike because resources are scarce. But not even the striking descriptions of the state of nature in Rousseau ([1755] 1999) draw upon natural scientific data, although Rousseau explicitly and extensively invokes Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, the most important

natural historian of his time. Rousseau’s naturalisation of culture, undertaken in his social contract theory, includes a variety of culturalisations of nature, for example in his theory of natural sympathy, in the contrast between the physical strength of the savage and that of the civilised, in the image of spontaneous mating without lasting emotional ties, or in the many comparisons of man and animal.

Naturalisations of gender and genderings of nature represent special cases of the naturalisation of culture and the culturalisation of nature in the history of ideas and in real life, special cases, admittedly, which in their generality pervade all human thought and action and, despite their diversity, each exhibit a certain monotony.

Naturalisations of gender always testify to the socio-historical status of relationships of domination and (division of) labour, embedding their social dimensions in a supposedly natural first nature and thus removing hierarchies and hegemonies from the field of historical contestability and, as it were, setting them up for eternity (in the Weberian sense of traditional domination). Naturalisations of gender involve and promote comparatively banal, if highly effective, deductions: since women, unlike men, can give birth, women are more suitable for care work, while men are better suited for work outside this sphere. Elaborate interactions between the material and symbolic dimensions of anatomical sex are hardly analysed, little discussed, rarely developed.

Genderings of nature function in a similarly simple way, albeit according to a different mode, since – in contrast to the naturalisations of gender regarding human nature – they focus on non-human nature. In particular, recent analytically sophisticated feminist research in the history of science has demonstrated that non-human nature was primarily gendered with images of the female (see, for example, Merchant 1980; 1989; Keller 1986; 1992; Scheich 1993; Orland/Scheich 1995; Schiebinger 1995; Winterfeld 2006), a culturalisation of nature through which stereotypical social dimensions of gender that have been naturalised are transferred back to representations and events of non-human nature. To take an example: frightening, inexplicable natural phenomena give rise to witchcraft phantasies, which in turn are explained as the cause of threatening natural phenomena, which then become proof of the existence of witches, and so on. The oscillation between the culture- and nature-related narrative reinforces and consolidates both dimensions:

both the naturalisation of gender and the gendering of nature. The result is an almost impervious edifice of nature, culture and gender that over time and space has produced and continues to produce a highly stable domination of women and non-human nature.

In addition to these two perspectives, or rather woven into these two central perspectives, feminist theory on the nature-culture relation spreads out into diverse, highly differentiated dimensions that tend to adopt one of two approaches. The first looks at the human-nature relationship from the inside, as it were, directing focus primarily onto the nature (or natural processes) of the human body; the second looks outwards and considers the human being (almost in the Marxian sense) in relation to his or her metabolism with (non-human) nature. Examples of both approaches can be found in all eras of the history of feminist ideas, from Mary Shelley's notorious critique of science in *Frankenstein* to the new(ish) investigations into technology, economics, medicine and the history of the body (for examples of the historicity of societal relationships with nature see Haraway 1989 on the history of primatology, Merchant 1989 on the history of the cultivation of nature and Duden 1987 on the history of the body). Since the beginning of modernity, feminist scholars have taken great interest in how natural science and technologies view and/or examine the female body; the female human being appears here again and again both in relation to animals and under a technically/technologically instrumentalised gaze. Whether women belong to the realm of the fully civilised human being or more to the realm of non-human nature is, among other things, open to critical discussion.

4. The history of ideas of gender

4.1 Exemplary and excursive: positions on the nature-culture relation of gender in the modern history of feminist theory

The range of definitions of gender within feminist theory can only be described as extreme, and it is likely more extreme than in any other political theory in the modern history of ideas. It ranges from the essentialist pole represented paradigmatically by the 19th century thinkers of difference and the ecofeminism of the 1970s to today's radically social-constructionist pole

represented by the Butler school. In 230 years of feminist theorizing, no question has divided feminists more than the question of the 'share' of "nature" in the determination of *Geschlecht*. It is remarkable that within feminist theory there have been very few attempts (cf. section 5.) to grasp the nature-culture relation in an analytically complex and philosophically elaborate way; the extremes prevail and have repeatedly led to intra-feminist battles (and I choose this word quite deliberately). A mutually agreed definition of *Geschlecht* does not exist within the respective discursive contexts. However, a history of feminist ideas can be sketched in which egalitarian feminism dominated at one time, theories of sexual difference at another, materialist theories at one time, social constructionist theories at another, sometimes the theoretical pendulum swung to the side of nature, then again to the side of culture. Yet these possible groupings are not even congruent but enter into very specific (sometimes quite crude) connections. At the beginning of modernity, at the end of the 18th century, the cultural dimension initially dominates, which is linked to the proclamation of equal human rights for women in the context of the French Revolution. Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges represent a way of thinking that begins from the biological sex but focuses on the appalling social inequalities. In the course of the 19th century, nature-related perspectives became increasingly prominent. Noteworthy here are all the currents of materialist/socialist feminism and its critique of the capitalist-patriarchal logic of production, from Flora Tristan to Clara Zetkin. It applies also to the feminist theorists of gender difference in the bourgeois and the radical early women's movement, who emphasize the valuable characteristics of the feminine, from Louise Otto-Peters to Helene Lange and Gertrud Bäumer to Helene Stöcker. After the exceptional position that Beauvoir's work occupies in the history of feminist ideas (cf. section 2.), the women's movement completely reorganised itself globally in the course of the 1960s and there was a brief prevalence of egalitarian feminism and focus on the social dimensions of gender, in which far-reaching critiques of every naturalisation of gender roles, hierarchies, divisions of labour etc. were articulated, as exemplified by Betty Friedan and Kate Millett. The dramatic return of an emphatic reference to nature in feminism coincides with the ecology movement of the 1970s and 1980s, in which women worldwide celebrated the sisterhood of women and non-human nature in both theoretical and practical

political terms. Internationally significant protagonists of this tradition of thought are Susan Griffin, Mary Daly and Vandana Shiva. Since Judith Butler's appearance on the feminist theory stage in the early 1990s, one can see an unchallenged hegemony of the cultural, expressed in the form of constructionism and postmodernism (cf. section 1.1).

4.2 Newer and narrow(er): Unfolding the definition of *Geschlecht* as a sex-gender issue

The stages and positions briefly described in the previous section are only snapshots (for a detailed description, see Holland-Cunz 2003), each based on a rather crude representation of the nature-culture relation. The history of ideas regarding a definition of *Geschlecht* in the narrower sense of an interpretation of sex-gender only begins after the Second World War with, as it were, pre-feminist research and debates in which questions of gender identity, transformations and alignments are the focus (see, among others, the disparate accounts in Wende 2002; Karl 2011: 231 ff.; Frey Steffen 2017: 13 ff.; Villa 2019: 26 ff.; Türcke 2021: 131 ff.). The pre-feminist beginnings in the 1950s and 1960s, which are primarily associated with the names of John Money and Robert Stoller, often remain vague in the history of ideas in many of today's texts, although one of the most significant theorists of second-wave feminism dealt with them as early as 1969/1970, unnoticed by current representations: Kate Millett. (2016: 23 ff., esp. 29–33). Millett already established at this time how strong the interrelations between biological and social determinants of gendered existence are, among other things through her thesis that even seemingly wholly supra-historical characteristics of "biological origin" such as male physical strength were and are "culturally encouraged through breeding, diet and exercise" (Millett 2016: 27). The current assertion that sex only underwent its needed deconstruction in 1990 with Butler's *Gender Trouble* is therefore incorrect. It is more accurate to say that it was only with *Gender Trouble* that a dematerialisation of gender determination began, in which the body is primarily regarded as a culturally inscribable surface.

The first theorists of the New Women's Movement did not think of the pair of categories in such radically abbreviated terms; rather, they historicised them in an elaborate way. Important for this analytically demanding

approach are the initial attempts to a) designate sex and gender more precisely and b) to place them in an insightful relation. Here, the early work of Gayle Rubin (1975) stands out, who paradigmatically and influentially outlined *sex/gender as a systemic categorical couplet* in the mid-1970s. In the midst of the exhilarating awakening of the New Women's Movement, Sherry Ortner (1972) also made a statement in the fields of political theory and the philosophy of nature with her text "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" Interestingly, both Rubin and Ortner argue from an anthropological perspective. Thinking structurally, these early texts reveal the interconnectedness of cultural habits, ritual practices, gender-specific divisions of labour, reproductive bodily capacities, and social relationships of love, family and kinship. The symbolic deep structures of access to the world are not to be conceived without the specific relationships of reproduction. Although both essays initially attracted a great deal of attention, even prominence, within feminist theory and feminist history, in the course of the 1980s the term sex was visibly marginalised vis-à-vis the term gender, and was finally banished from the mainstream with the turn to social constructionism. In the course of the so-called linguistic turn, the definition of sex now seemed, to critics, to be afflicted with crude, ecofeminist-spiritualist or body-political essentialism and epistemological simplicity. Such harsh criticism was partly justified, since a spiritualist ecofeminism oriented to gender difference had developed into a strong current within the international women's movement since the 1970s; Haraway's (1985) "Manifesto for Cyborgs" had already critically invoked this in 1985; the cyborg was to replace the goddess as the central image.

In the first half of the 1990s, the linguistic turn was still accompanied by sceptical claims. This can be seen particularly well in three much-discussed publications, even if we only look at the German-speaking world: an essay from 1992 by Regina Gildemeister and Angelika Wetterer with the significant title "How Genders Are Made" ("Wie Geschlechter gemacht werden") (Gildemeister/Wetterer 1992), a 1993 issue of *Feministische Studien* on the topic "Critique of the Category 'Gender'" ("Kritik der Kategorie 'Geschlecht'") and the volume *Axes of Thought: On the Theoretical and Institutional Talk of Gender* (*Denkachsen. Zur theoretischen und institutionellen Rede vom Geschlecht*), edited in 1994 by Theresa Wobbe and Gesa Lindemann (Wobbe/Lindemann 1994). These

texts clearly show that gender was becoming the dominant perspective over sex, and that discursive reality was being explored more elaborately than material reality, so that Butler's view of the world was gradually gaining ground. Accordingly, Barbara Duden's (1993) essay in *Feministische Studien* "The Woman Without a Body: On Judith Butler's Disembodiment" ("Die Frau ohne Unterleib: Zu Judith Butlers Entkörperung"), in particular, triggered exceptionally vehement objections, even a scholarly uproar. From her perspective in the field of the history of the body, Duden accused Butler of the complete dematerialisation and de-naturalisation of bodies and attributed to her a cynical, larmoyant, self-satisfied theoretical gesture pandering to famous postmodern men (on the latter, cf. similar arguments in Nussbaum 1999).

How can we explain the immense influence of *Gender Trouble* on feminist theory over the past 30 years? Benevolently interpreted, Butler's text appeared precisely at a time when a whole series of questions had piled up, almost aporetically: a) the glaring discrepancy between feminist spiritualism and rapid high-tech capitalism – here we find the famous "Manifesto for Cyborgs", in which Donna Haraway (1985) criticizes an identity-theory feminism and develops an anti-essentialist posthumanist feminism; b) the increasingly barren debates on equality versus difference; c) unresolved problems with the politics of alliance; d) unanswered questions about the sex-gender relation and the nature-culture relation. Particularly for young feminists, a conception of biological femininity as a surface of social inscriptions seemed theoretically challenging and politically attractive.

Butler's central thesis is contained in a suggestive claim: "even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two" (Butler 1990: 10). She continues: "Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature" (ibid.: 11). And two pages later: "hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along." To what extent, Butler (ibid.) asks, "does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s) of gender" (emphasis in original). The attractiveness of these

reflections is immediately evident: if sign is by definition determinant in contrast to flesh, patriarchal domination (and its history) can be rewritten and counteracted in a liberation theory via the reassignment of signs.

The few trenchant objections on both sides of the Atlantic, exemplified by Barbara Duden on the one side and Martha Nussbaum on the other, have not, however, been able to prevent the triumph of social constructionism and the *primacy of discourse over matter, sign over flesh*. An initially hopeful development for *materialist*-oriented feminist thinkers dates to the end of the first decade of the 21st century and is thus itself not entirely new. The internationally acclaimed book by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (2008) with the eloquent title *Material Feminisms* seemed to indicate a new shift and departure in political theory, the so-called material turn, but the proclamation of this turn remained without lasting resonance (on the material turn in Germany, see Löw et al. 2017). In retrospect, this could have been because the Alaimo and Hekman's work still paid too much homage to Butler's position, despite all the criticism, and seemed unwilling to make a radical break with it. This is particularly evident in the reputation of Karen Barad's text (2008) and her prominent status as (professorial) successor to Donna Haraway. Barad combines the important critique of a dematerialisation of feminism with a homage to Judith Butler and proposes the term "intra action" instead of interactions as a dissolution of classical dualisms (cf. Barad 2012; for detailed discussion see Holland-Cunz 2014; 2017). In contrast to the aims of Alaimo and Hekman's anthology, a rematerialisation of feminist theory has not taken hold, however; to this day, sex remains under-exposed compared to gender, flesh compared to sign – to put it mildly.

5. Attempts at (more) elaborate conceptions of the nature-culture relation with regard to gender

It is not the constructionist marginalisation or even negation of sex vis-à-vis gender that points the way out of the feminist aporias in defining gender, but theoretical attempts to recognize and appropriately conceptualize both gender in sex and sex in gender. It goes without saying that the perception of biological gender in one's self-image and in the image of others cannot be unaffected by social norms (normalities) of perception, just as it goes without saying that the performance of gender only

functions with some difficulty independently of bodily materialities. Beauvoir's existentialist anthropology (cf. section 2.) stands out succinctly as an example of an appropriately complex version – and also stands out so prominently in the history of ideas because it was and is so often misunderstood.

If we imagine for a moment the understanding of gender as a *categorical continuum*, at one pole of which all the dimensions of sex are located, and at the other pole of which stand all the dimensions of gender, the following picture can be drawn. The 'sex' pole contains all material physical dimensions (external and internal anatomy, chromosomes, hormones, gender-differentiated bodily processes, etc.), the opposite pole 'gender' contains all social dimensions (gendered attributions, divisions of labour, hierarchies, positions of power, norms, conventions, traditions, etc.). A variety of points along this continuum could then be described, each closer to one or the other pole of the continuum and thus containing, as it were, more material or more social interpretations of gender. Depending on one's philosophical preference, this would result in a conceptualisation of gender that would be more closely connected to its natural or its cultural side. Conceptions closer to the sex pole would emphasize more the irrefutability of material foundations and inherent logics for social outcomes, while conceptions closer to the gender pole would emphasize more the social imaginaries and institutions beyond their anchoring in medias res. It should be explicitly noted here that analytical concepts such as a continuum or the blurring of boundaries within the polarity of nature/culture are among the iconic images of feminist posthumanism, prototypically found in almost all of Haraway's texts, but also, for example, in Rosi Braidotti's (2013) monograph on posthumanism.

What would be particularly interesting in my thought experiment, which in no way belongs to the posthumanist current of thought, would be precisely that region around the middle of the continuum where the maximum entanglement of both poles would have to be located – a categorical region that establishes how materialities directly produce attributions or how attributions directly affect corporealities. Within the history of feminist ideas, this region has seldom been elaborated, although it has not stayed entirely un(der)determined. Interweavings should therefore not be confused with blurring of boundaries.

This is because the history of feminist ideas has on occasion produced sophisticated attempts to grasp the nature-culture relation with regard to gender in an analytically complex way. First and foremost, Pierre Bourdieu's ([1998] 2001: 23) thesis of the *somatisation of the social relations of domination* must be mentioned, since here, via the concept of habitus, social dimensions are introduced into gendered corporeality. For Bourdieu, the experience of domination is reflected in the specific personal experience of being a gendered body – for example, in the individual's self-image, in personal bodily sensations, in the forms of expression and postures in public space, in a tone of voice, in forms of movement, in the extent to which one takes up space, etc.: the dominated (often female) body acts in a more anatomically withdrawn manner, less assertively, and with significantly less self-efficacy than a body to which the dominant position has literally become second nature. Habitualised assignments of place in the webs of power and powerlessness can be clearly recognised in the self-perceptions and self-presentations of bodies and penetrate deep into the unconscious; *social dimensions are embodied in a very real way*. To put it more pointedly, it could be said, following Bourdieu, that it is possible to direct and to think gender into sex; the social body does not remain exterior to the anatomical body. The symbolic foundations of the material come impressively into focus here.

In the debates and arguments against the social constructionist hegemony in the first half of the 1990s mentioned above, there are some further highly interesting points of reference. Gesa Lindemann (1993; 1994; 2019), for example, thinks of a complex entanglement of "being a body" (*Leibsein*) and "having a body" (*Körperhaben*) (Lindemann 2019: 41), in which the human being as an embodied being can be both nature and culture, both "knowledge about the body" and "experienced [...] givenness of one's own body" (ibid.: 43). Lindemann's picture of a complex entanglement is based on a subtle, historically and sociologically modelled distinction between body and embodiment, which is, however, explicitly not a simple dualism. Suitably complex are also Hilge Landweer's (1993; 1994) reflections on the philosophical treatment of species-related dimorphism, in which she demonstrates that the different reproductive functions of women and men have found expression throughout the history of philosophy. Landweer thinks of the material foundations – human generativity – of

the symbolic as non-random occasions for the chosen modes of symbolisation; the dimorphic reproduction of the human species forms the non-contingent background of every social version of *Geschlecht*; the two different contributions to the reproduction of the genus are “not a purely historical” context (Landweer 1994: 152); not every human experience is thus equally privileged to be symbolised (ibid.: 160). (For a detailed discussion of Lindemann and Landweer, see Holland-Cunz 1996.)

As already mentioned, the socio-ecological conceptualisations of “relationships with nature and gender”, inspired by Critical Theory, are also of particular help in getting us out of the mire in which the struggles around constructivism have meanwhile become stuck (cf. section 3.1). The simultaneity of historicisations and materialisations, of relational and social dimensions of the determination of *Geschlecht* further evoke a specifically German-language debate, which becomes clear above all in Ursula Beer’s attempt at an adequate unfolding of the “structural category of *Geschlecht*” (Beer 1990). Here, too, production and reproduction play a central analytical role. Last but not least, the term “naturecultures”, coined by Donna Haraway (2003) and immediately adopted worldwide, should be mentioned, as it refers in a complex way to the *ineluctable interweaving of the natural and cultural modes of formation of Geschlecht*.

These brief reflections offer promising signs for a sophisticated version of the nature-culture relation in the definition of *Geschlecht* – indicating that (and how) it can succeed, as well as that (and how) the cruder, simple definitions located at one pole or the other can be intellectually overcome. Significantly, the concepts outlined above come largely from the early years of the linguistic turn; materialist dimensions have scarcely developed since their appearance. Developing them further today, however, would have to assume that the intra-feminist struggles for interpretation of “*Geschlecht*” would give way to pluralistic discourses and not – as is currently the case – be beholden to academic positions of power and privilege

In view of today’s material global crises, first and foremost the (potentially) impending four-degree warmer world, the *deconstruction of deconstruction* would also be a good thing for gender studies. As bitter as it may be and as cynical as it may sound, the current global pandemic could act as a decisive factor in the dispute between feminist materialists and idealists and help the

neo-materialist positions that exist in rudimentary form to gain greater recognition. So far, however, the critique of social constructionism that could have been awakened with the work of Alaimo and Hekman has come to a standstill and the constructionist hegemony has not been broken. The intrinsic logic (*Eigenlogik*) of natural processes of human and non-human nature, the intrinsic logic of nature (Holland-Cunz 1994), cannot exhaustively be deconstructed in discursive and symbolical terms, especially not in times of the corona pandemic and climate crisis. In the conflict between essentialism and constructivism, *certain essentials remain essential*; feminist social constructionism (though not solely feminist social constructionism) is and remains a patriarchal delusion of possibility. Here, I am in agreement with Türcke (2021: 219 ff.), and have been over the period of a quarter of a century.

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